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CBS Troop Assertion Based On 'Guesses,' Witness Says

By M. A. FARBER

Samuel A. Adams testified yesterday that an assertion on a disputed CBS documentary that North Vietnamese infiltration into South Vietnam in late 1967 was quadruple the rate reported by Gen. William C. Westmoreland's command was based on "guesses" by CBS military sources.

But Mr. Adams — a former Central Intelligence Agency analyst whose thesis of "deception" by the command underlies the 1982 broadcast that is the subject of General Westmoreland's $120 million libel suit in Federal District Court in Manhattan — said that "in intelligence, it is almost impossible to do anything but guess."

"You never have firm and solid information," Mr. Adams told the jury under cross-examination by David Dorsen, a lawyer for the general. "We didn't have a big clicker counting off the troops coming down the Ho Chi Minh Trail."

The 90-minute documentary — for which Mr. Adams was a paid consultant — charged that General Westmoreland's command suppressed contemporary reports that infiltration in each of the five months before the enemy's Tet offensive of January 1968 was 20,000, not the 5,500 official figure. The 20,000 estimate was supported on the broadcast by Col. Russell Cooley, a former intelligence officer in Saigon.

Narration by Wallace

Mike Wallace — the narrator of the documentary and, like Mr. Adams, now a defendant at this trial — went on to say in the documentary:

"And so, the President of the United States, the American Army in Vietnam and the American public back home were destined to be caught totally unprepared for the size of the attack." President Lyndon B. Johnson, he said, "had been alerted to the enemy's intentions, but no one had been able or willing to inform him of the enemy's capability."

A key witness for the network, Mr. Adams provided CBS with the results of his research carried on over two decades which led him to believe that General Westmoreland's command conspired for political reasons to minimize the strength of the enemy in South Vietnam in 1967.

Mr. Dorsen began cross-examining Mr. Adams on Wednesday and will continue when court resumes on Monday. Yesterday, with Mr. Adams again less composed than he had been on direct examination, Mr. Dorsen sought to establish that the statements on infiltration and other segments of the program were without merit.

His voice heavy with sarcasm, Mr. Dorsen asked Mr. Adams whether he really believed that senior officers in Saigon had decided to withhold vital information on enemy size from the troops in the field.

Q. Were they trying to keep the figures a secret from the U.S. Army, Mr. Adams?

A. They were trying to keep the numbers down. It's a horrible thing; I find it hard to contemplate.

Q. So you find it rather incredible?

A. Sir, I find a whole lot of things in this story incredible. It was very difficult for me to accept the idea, but, as incredible as it was, I came to believe it happened.

General Westmoreland, who commanded American forces in Vietnam from 1964 to 1968, contends that CBS libeled him by saying that he had lied to President Johnson and the Joint Chiefs of Staff about the true strength of the North Vietnamese and Vietcong.

A Long-Running Dispute

The CBS documentary — "The Uncounted Enemy: A Vietnam Deception" — focused on a long-running intelligence dispute in 1967 in which Mr. Adams and some C.I.A. colleagues argued for a total enemy strength estimate of a half-million, twice the size of the estimate successfully propounded by General Westmoreland's command.

The accusation regarding infiltration figures was only one of the allegations made by the broadcast. It also charged that, to show progress in the war, General Westmoreland had imposed an "arbitrary ceiling" of 300,000 on reports of enemy size, mainly by deleting the Vietcong's self-defense forces from the military listing of enemy strength known as the order of battle.

The general has testified that he removed the self-defense forces because he had come to believe that they were insignificant militarily. He said he had informed his immediate military and civilian superiors not only of that action but also of a new set of higher estimates for the self-defense and other irregular forces. He identified those superiors as Adm. Ulysses S. Grant Sharp, the commander of American forces in the Pacific, and Ellsworth Bunker, the United States Ambassador in Saigon in 1967.

Yesterday, Mr. Adams acknowledged that, before the broadcast was shown in January 1982, he had read a letter from Col. Gains Hawkins, a former intelligence officer, who wrote that he had briefed an American public relations officer in Saigon on the new figures for the "irregulars."

Mr. Adams said that, after the officers left Saigon in 1968, they did not have access to the "raw data" on which their reports had been based. Nor, he said, had he seen such reports, which he presumed had been "destroyed." He said the 20,000 figure was used in the documentary after it was "confirmed" by a former intelligence lieutenant named Michael Hankins.

Mr. Dorsen suggested to the jury that Mr. Adams's notes of his one conversation with Mr. Hankins, in 1980, were meaningless and that estimates of 20,000 were no more reliable than other estimates provided CBS by other sources. Bernard Gattozzi, another former intelligence officer, Mr. Dorsen said, had told George Crile, the producer of the documentary, that the infiltration from North Vietnam in the fall of 1967 might have been as high as 70,000 a month.

"We went with the lower figures," Mr. Adams said, adding that he did not believe Mr. Gattozzi meant to say that the 70,000 figure was the rate each month. "This gets rather complex," Mr. Adams said.

On Monday, Mr. Adams testified that Mr. Gattozzi told him that infiltration in those months was "in the neighborhood of 25,000, 30,000, 35,000, 40, and 45,000."

"Did it ever occur to you," Mr. Dorsen asked yesterday, "that these gentlemen might be mistaken?"

Mr. Adams paused before replying.

"I suppose it might have occurred to me," he said. But after talking to the officers, "my doubts went away."

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Colonel Hawkins — an important source for both Mr. Adams and CBS — wrote to his wife on May 30, 1967, only two weeks after General Westmoreland had learned of the higher figures and, according to documents in this case, only days after he ordered that they be passed along to the Embassy. The public relations officer was identified in the letter as Barry Zorthian, who was not interviewed for the documentary.

Mr. Adams said he had not discussed the letter with Colonel Hawkins, with whom he had had many conversations about the intelligence dispute since 1967.

Mr. Adams also conceded that another former intelligence officer in Saigon had told him before January 1982 that Admiral Sharp may have attended a May 1967 briefing on the new estimates for "irregulars." Admiral Sharp was also not interviewed for the broadcast.

With regard to monthly infiltration estimates of 20,000 between September 1967 and January 1968, Mr. Adams said they were the "best guesses" of several former military intelligence officers. And, in intelligence work, he said, the word "guess" is synonymous with "estimate."

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